

Adventure Journal - 13 - Side Trip

Part Three

by Michael A. Stackpole

Propelled by a poke in the kidneys with a blaster carbine, Corran Horn stumbled into the makeshift cell.

He got control of himself fast enough to avoid bumping into his father and turned back quickly, but Jodo Kast swung the wrought-iron gate shut. That effectively sealed the two Horns in a small, dusty grotto that had once been home to a fine collection of wines from throughout the Empire. At least that's the impression I get from all the broken bottle bits on the floor.

Corran skewered Kast with the nastiest stare he could muster.

"This isn't over between us Kast."

The bounty hunter regarded Corran placidly, but the trio of Zekka Thyne's henchmen forcing the other man and the Tunroth into a second grotto across the cellar laughed out loud. Their leader, the beefy; red-haired man who had given Corran the shove, sneered at the undercover Corellian Security Force officer. "You're strictly small time, pal. The boss isn't going to give you a crack at this guy. I'll be the one to take care of you."

"Oh?" Corran gave the man a fetal grin. "I didn't realize Thyne was into doing favors for the hired help. You're welcome to try me any time."

"He won't get the chance." Kast's voice came low and cold. "I've put up with your prattling and bragging and threats, Corran, and I am not of a mind to let someone else eliminate annoyances from my life."

The armored mercenary pointed a finger at the redheaded man.

"Touch him and I will consider it a matter of honor to turn you inside out."

The redhead paled. "Yes, sir."

Another of Thyne's Black Sun underlings closed the other gate and secured it. "They're in. Wanna threaten any of them, Nidder?"

The redhead frowned. "Suck vacuum, Somms. You think you're so funny, you can think up jokes while you stand guard on these clowns."

Somms' blond brows arched down toward his nose.

"They're in here secure, they don't need guarding."

Kast shook his head. "No, not in here, of course not, but outside the room, on the first stair landing. There you can hear commotion from in here or the main floor and be able to respond."

Nidder shoved his blaster carbine into Somms' hands.

"You heard him."

Corran smiled. "Just what I expected, Kast. You want someone stationed between you and me."

Kast grabbed the grate's iron bars and shook it once, hard. The metal rattled loudly and, startled, Corran involuntarily took a step back.

Nidder, Somms and the third Black Sunner started laughing, but their mirth didn't stop Corran from hearing Kast's reply to his remark.

"I've no fear of you, Corran. I look forward to you getting out of here because with Thyne sending his blaster-boys off to ambush Maranne and Riiij, I'm pretty much assured that I'm all that stands between you and your freedom. You may be good-you may even be better than I give you credit for being-but I'm still better."

Corran's left temple throbbed from where Kast had jammed his blaster pistol against it. "Keep thinking that, Kast, and don't be surprised when I prove you wrong."

"Come see me, Corran, when your boasts are not idle."

Kast turned and herded the rest of the men from the small room.

An old wooden door closed behind him and clicked shut.

Corran stared after him for a moment then spun on his heel and swore.

"Sithspawn! That son of a rancor played me for an idiot." He looked up at his father. "I'm sorry, Dad. I really made a mess of things."

The elder Horn's hazel eyes narrowed. "How do you plot our predicament being your fault?"

"I should have known there was something wrong."

Corran scrubbed his hands over his face. "Their ship, the Hopskip, is a piece of trash that Crisk wouldn't use to haul dead bodies, much less valuable merchandise. The others had no idea what was in their cargo hold and it turned out to be full of sleight boxes."

Hal frowned. "Sleight boxes are hardly state of the art for smugglers these days. It's almost as if they wanted to be caught."

"Right, exactly." Corran leaned against a fiberplast wine rack built into the grotto's wall. "Kast told Thyne the boxes are empty, but I found some with junked holo-seals and popped them. One box had spice-strictly joy-dust grade, but spice nonetheless-and the other had a fortune in uncut Durindfire gems. Even if we figure that one box of gems is it and the other 199 are spice, Crisk can use the gems to buy an army and use the spice to flood the market and kill Black Sun's profits."

Hal Horn turned a wooden wine-box over and sat. "So what you're telling me is that we have non-smugglers bringing in two hundred sleight boxes and they have no idea what's in them. You find gems and spice in two and the shipment is headed for Crisk. Crisk himself can't put together that sort of shipment, so he has a backer. Who?"

Corran frowned. "The gems come from Tatooine. Isn't there a Hutt out there working the spice trade?"

"Jappa or Jadda or something like that, yes. He's powerful there, but expanding into Corellia? That's too bold a move." Hal's mouth opened, then he shook his head.

He motioned his son aside and looked past Corran toward the other cell.

"Haber Trell, how long have you known Jodo Kast?"

The Hopskip's pilot stood and grasped the bars of his prison. "I don't know him. He's along for the ride."

"Yes." Hal leaned back against the wall and laughed lightly.

"That's it."

Corran shook his head. "You're saying Kast is behind the shipment going to Crisk? But that makes no sense since he's told Thyne's people where to find the boxes with the spice and gems."

"No, Corran, Kast isn't the mastermind, he's what's being smuggled into Corellia."

Corran's jaw shot open. "It doesn't make any sense."

"No?" Hal gave Corran an appraising glance-of the sort that in the past had warned Corran that his father thought he was being lazy in his thinking. "What do you make of Kast's last remark?"

Corran thought back. "He was taunting me."

"Agreed, but what did he tell us by taunting you?"

The sigh came up all the way from Corran's toes. "He told us that he was all that stood between us and freedom-that Thyne's guys are all gone. He told me to come find him when we got free." Corran slapped his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I should have seen that."

"You did."

"Yeah, but it took you to point it out to me." Corran shook his head and toed the neck of a broken bottle.

"There are times when my brain just doesn't work."

"No, Corran, your brain works fine." Hal kept his tone even, but pointed a finger at his son. "You just need to focus your thinking."

You're angry because of how Kast tricked you, and I think you were a bit afraid for how I was doing."

"Right on both counts."

"It's understandable, son, and appreciated in the case of your concern for me, but you can't let your emotions and incidental things deflect you."

"I know that, Dad. I really do." He smiled at his father.

"I try to follow your example, but you're better at it than I am."

"I have a few years on you, Corran."

"It's more than just the years, Dad." Corran winced. "I never would have read Kast's message right the way you did."

The elder Horn's eyes twinkled. "I have to admit to you, Corran, I cheated this time out."

"What?"

Hal pointed past him. "Up there, on the bars Kast shook, see what that little thing is, will you?"

Corran turned and looked closely at the bars. Where Kast had grasped one in his right hand, Corran saw a small black cylinder about a hand-span in length and about the diameter of a blaster-bolt. He freed it from the bar with a tug, leaving an adhesive residue on the wrought-iron, and felt a small button beneath his thumb, near the cylinder's tip.

"Be careful with that, Corran."

The younger man nodded and hit the button. All but invisible in the half-light, a delicate monomolecular blade slid from the cylinder.

"I know what it is, and I remember what happened to Lefty Dindo."

Corran cut carefully down with the blade and through the lock's bolt.

He retracted the stiletto's fragile blade and swung the door open.

"Freeing us from this cell is a bit easier than Lefty trying to use one of these to free himself from binders."

Hal Horn paused in the door cell's doorway. "You might want to cut us a couple of the bars to use as weapons."

Somms might not be the brightest of Black Sunners, but I think he's going to take some convincing before he lets us out of here."

"Agreed." Extending the blade again, Corran cut a pair of 50-centimeter- long bars from the bottom of the grate and handed one to his father.

Hal swung the club against his left hand with a meaty thwack.

"This will work. Now how do we lure Somms in?"

Corran squinted at the room's closed door. "You figure Somms as someone who will raise an alarm immediately, or will wait to report success?"

"After Nidder's giving him the duty? He'll act, then report."

"That's my read, too. The landing was ten steps up and we're far enough away from the office that if we make some noise, no one will notice, I think." Corran smiled.

"I'll do the hard work if you want to do the yelling."

"Yelling works for me." Hal Horn smiled. "Be careful."

"Right." Corran walked over to the wooden door and set the length of the blade to a half-centimeter shy of the door's depth, then cut very cautiously. He scored a circle in the center of it. Once he had the circle taken care of, he cut lines heading out from it as if a child drawing a sunburst. Lastly he carved little semicircles around the hinges and the lock.

He closed the blade and handed it to his father in exchange for one of the clubs. "Okay, here goes nothing."

"Wait!"

Corran looked over at Haber Trell. "What do you want?"

"Don't leave us in here. If you're busting out, we want to go, too."

"I don't think so, Trell." The flesh tightened around Corran's eyes.

"Even if you're twice the fighter that you are a smuggler, you'll still be in the way."

Hal nodded in agreement, but tossed them the molecular stiletto anyway.

"Corran's right, you won't want to come with us. We'll head out and deal with Thyne. Give us a couple of minutes, then go fast.

Steal one of Thyne's airspeeders and fly. Head back to your ship and get out of the system."

Trell nodded. "Thanks."

Corran frowned at his father, then pointed at Trell.

"And, listen, don't put that cargo back on your ship. You don't want to be shipping spice around."

Trell shivered and Corran took that to be an eloquent answer to his caution.

"Ready, Dad?"

"All set."

Corran smiled and ran backward at the door. He leaped up and hit it smack in the middle with his back.

The door exploded into fragments around him, spraying large chunks of wood into the narrow corridor outside the makeshift prison. Corran crashed down amid it all, yelping involuntarily instead of letting forth with a great oof as he had planned. No jagged edges, but the debris sure is tumpy.

Hal's voice flooded through the dying echoes of the door's crisp crack.

"Keep that Tunroth away from me!"

With his eyes nearly shut, Corran saw Somms come flying down the stairs to the landing. The man kept his back to the stone wall as he crept toward the cell, then he brandished the blaster carbine and prepared to rush into the cell. To do that he prepared to pivot on his right foot, fill the doorway, then go in.

As Somms' left foot came around in the pivot move, Corran caught it in his left hand. Letting Somms' momentum pull him up into a sitting position, Corran brought his metal truncheon down on the top of the man's pelvis. Somms started to cry out, more in surprise than pain it seemed, when Hal appeared in the doorway and clipped him with a fist in the head.

Somms collapsed to the floor and did not move.

Corran frowned at his father. "Why cut the club if you aren't going to use it?"

"Didn't need it." Hal snaked the blaster carbine from beneath Somms, flicked the selector lever over to stun, and pumped a blue bolt into him. The Black Sunher twitched once, then lay gently still. "I expect he'll still feel the blow you dealt him when he wakes up."

"We can but hope." Corran rolled him over and unfastened his blaster belt. Donning it himself, Corran pulled the blaster from it and checked the power pack. He glanced up at his father. "You going to leave that set on stun? "

"I haven't noticed that killshots fly any more true than stunbolts."

"True, but there's just so many more forms to fill out when we bring them back alive."

"Don't even joke about that, Corran." His father gave him a reproving glance that made Corran feel about as big as a hologame piece. "Set it on stun and you won't regret accidentally hitting a friend."

"Yes, sir." Corran flicked the pistol's selector lever to stun and stood up. He waved his father toward the door.

"Time to get Thyne. Age before beauty."

"Brains before impudence." Hal tossed a quick salute to Haber Trell and Rathe. "Luck to you, but keep your heads down and get out of here fast. If Thyne doesn't react well to our refusing his hospitality, you don't want to be in the blast radius."

Arl Nidder matched Jodo Kast's long-legged stride as best he could.

The bounty hunter impressed him, but the armor impressed him more. Now if I had a suit of that Mandalorian armor I'd be pretty tough. I'd be able to get a lot of light-years between me and the rest of the Bromstaad boys. Maybe I hire out to do wetwork for some Moff, or maybe even Prince Xizor.

His ruminations ended abruptly as they reentered Thyne's office.

Nidder liked the office because it seemed like a museum to him. He'd never been in a real museum, but he knew they were places where old and valued things were collected. He took it as a mark of pride that Thyne kept him close enough to protect the crime lord's prized possessions.

Surrounded by beauty though he was, Thyne did not look happy. The holoprojector plate built into his desk showed a view of Thyne's fortress and the surrounding valley in translucent green detail.

Moving around the area were small orange icons that Nidder had seen in security simulations, but only when they were running worst case scenarios to scare the wits out of new recruits.

Nidder's jaw dropped. "Are those really storm-troopers?"

Thyne nodded, then snapped a comlink on. "All personnel report to battle stations. This is not a drill. We have hostile deployment to the north and east. Move it, I want all defenses reported as operational in thirty seconds."

Nidder and Deif started toward the room's partially ajar doors, but Thyne stopped them with a snarl. "Not you two. Not that I don't trust you, Kast."

Kast raised his hands. "But you don't trust me. I'll remind you of this next time we negotiate a price for my services." The long, tall bounty hunter pulled a chair around where he could watch Thyne on the right and the doors at the left, but did so in such a casual way that it took Nidder a moment or two to recognize exactly what he was doing.

Kast looked directly at Nidder, then calmly crossed his right leg over his left.

Nidder shifted uncomfortably and got the distinct impression that the only way he'd get a suit of that armor was to be lucky enough to be around when someone else killed Kast and peeled him out of it. Of course, the thought didn't form itself exactly that way in Nidder's brain. He just knew he didn't want that suit of armor, just one like it.

His momentary feeling of inferiority vanished as he realized Kast wasn't as smart as he thought himself to be. If the mercenary had turned his chair around he still could have watched the desk and doors, but also could see the painting of frolicking nudes on the wall. As it was, Nidder could fully appreciate it-though he was at a loss to explain why the artist had included gardening implements in the painting-and smiled to let Kast know what he was missing.

The hologram shifted to a schematic of the house, with the corridor outside the door rendered in yellow light that blinked on and off.

Thyne hissed furiously. "Someone is in the hall. The Imps have already infiltrated the building." He pointed Nidder and Deif toward the door: Kast started speaking in a loud voice. "Of course, handling things in a diplomatic manner works best." The bounty hunter pointed toward two spots along the wall where the Bromstaad mercenaries could cover the doorway with a murderous cross fire. "Then again, there are times when one has to be undiplomatic."

Nidder marveled at how Kast's voice covered the sound of his approach to the door. He stopped exactly where Kast wanted him to and drew his blaster pistol. He set it to kill and waited, but shot Kast a wink and a nod. When the nod was returned, Nidder even began to imagine that Kast might take him on as an apprentice, or even a partner. He's seen how good I am. He knows what he'll be getting when we work together.

The exploding of the lower half of one door interrupted Nidder's fantasy. Through the smoke and spray of fiery debris came the smallest of the prisoners they'd left below. Coming up into a crouch from the somersault that carried him through the hole, the brown-haired man raised a blaster pistol and triggered two shots. The first blue bolt missed, but the second caught Deif in the stomach, wreathing him in azure energy.

Nidder brought his pistol in line with the little man. He doesn't see me. He doesn't know I'm here. His mistake. Nidder started to tighten his finger on the trigger when he felt himself moving backward.

He felt his shoulders hit the wall, then his head rebounded from it.

Through the exploding stars he saw a second bolt flash out from the blaster built into the thigh of the Mandalorian armor.

In the nanosecond it took for the scarlet bolt to sizzle through his chest, Nidder realized Kast had positioned him so carefully and precisely because the bounty hunter wanted to kill him. Nidder did not feel outrage at having been so easily betrayed and slaughtered, nor did he, in his dying moment, grant Kast a modicum of respect for having worked so coolly to slay him. No, for Arl Nidder, dying as he slid to the floor, there was only one final thought. Now if I had a set of that armor....

Corran saw the red bolts burn by on his left and swung around in that direction as his target flopped to the ground. At the back of the room, Corran saw Thyne running for where a wall panel slid back to reveal a black recess. He started to track the fleeing crime lord, but pulled his pistol back as Kast's head and shoulders eclipsed Thyne.

He's getting away.

Corran glanced back at the door. "All clear."

Hal stepped through, looked at Nidder's body, then at Kast.

"That's another round of drinks on me by way of thanks."

The bounty hunter uncrossed his legs and stood. "Pest control."

Corran pointed at the dark opening in the wall.

"Thyne went out through there."

Hal approached it cautiously. "Looks clear."

Corran appropriated the blaster carbine the man he'd shot had been carrying and set it for stun. "Let's go find him."

He turned to Kast. "Come along. We could use your help."

There's a bounty on Thyne. We're going to get him, but the bounty can be yours." Corran looked around the room at the garish decorations and horrific art. "It might even be sufficient to buy some real art and offset memories of this place."

"You tempt me very much." Kast shrugged. "However, someone with such inferior taste in art should not be hard to catch. I would join you, but I'm a simple bounty hunter and I still have a job to do."

Despite having no read on Kast, Corran knew he was lying. He raised an eyebrow. "I don't believe you're a simple bounty hunter."

"Nor do I believe you and your father are simple hoodlums looking for underworld employment." Kast crossed to the desk and punched a button on the holographic display unit's control panel. A view of the surrounding area came up and Corran saw small orange icons moving in swarms over the terrain. "These are Imperial storm-troopers."

They're likely to make things uncomfortable if you don't get going.

You don't want to be caught here."

"Neither do you."

"I won't be."

Corran nodded. "Another time, then."

"Perhaps." The finality in Kast's voice told Corran there never would be a next time, and somehow he didn't find that prospect cause for anything but relief.

Corran rejoined his father just inside the entrance to Thyne's escape passage. The narrow corridor had been melted through the native stone with a gentle slope downward.

Every fifteen meters or so it cut back on itself, forcing the Horns to advance carefully. The brevity of the passages meant any firefight would be at close quarters and extremely deadly.

Corran clutched his blaster carbine in both hands and snuggled it against his right flank. It had been modified slightly after its arrival from the factory by the inclusion of a pinpoint glow rod attached to the left side of the barrel, and more work had been done on it to make it what was known in street parlance as a hotshot. The trigger guard had been cut away, leaving the trigger free and the weapon liable to be fired when the trigger caught on clothing or was otherwise jarred. Using a hotshot was supposed to indicate how tough a person was, but it only took one view of the results of an unsafed hotshot pistol being tucked into a waistband to convince most folks it was a foolhardy modification.

Of course, no one is going to tuck a carbine into his pants.

Corran smiled slightly, then nodded as his father signaled him to come forward. Remaining low, Corran came around the corner of the corridor, then dropped to the ground as a red blaster bolt sizzled through the air above him.

He shot back twice, but neither blue bolt hit anything but stone.

"Corridor widens out into a natural cave.

We're probably at the rear of the property."

"Okay, take it slow. Lose the light."

Corran flicked off the pinpoint glow rod and closed his eyes. He waited for a count of ten for his eyes to get adjusted to the darkness, then opened them. Bioluminescent lifeforms-lichen and the things that ate it-gave off a purplish glow that allowed Corran to make out shadowed shapes. Some were regular and appeared to be duraplast boxes of varying sizes, while the larger, more menacing ones were curiously hunched and gnarled stone formations. There seemed to be little physical modification of the cave; the floor remained uneven and boxes had been wedged in various places where space allowed. Corran assumed the previous owner had kept the cave in its natural state and Thyne had stored in it precious or vital cargoes that he did not trust to have any place else.

Corran crept forward, remaining low. He reached the first box and in the faint glow made out the stenciled Imperial legend proclaiming it to be full of blaster carbines.

He would have opened it, but the scent of spice lingered strongly enough in the immediate area that he knew what it really contained.

Either Thyne is just storing spice in this, or Black Sun has some backdoor Imperial connections that are allowing them to ship this stuff in past Customs.

I'll have to ask Loor about that.

Corran whistled short and sharp, then heard his father close the gap between them. For an older man, and one as big as he was, Hal moved pretty quietly. I felt his presence before I picked up that slight scuff of his sole against the stone.

Oh, Thyne, you don't know who you're messing with.

A return whistle sent Corran forward. He moved slowly and carefully, wending his way from one dark rock to another. He did his best to avoid those that were glowing because he didn't want to silhouette himself against one.

He took great care to make as little noise as possible, and smiled as he hunkered down behind a large black rock.

Corran looked back toward his father and was set to whistle when he heard the scrape of metal on a rock. He glanced up and triggered one shot from the blaster carbine.

The azure bolt streaked past Thyne as he leaped down from a large dolmen, then Thyne's right heel caught Corran in the shoulder and spun him to the ground. His blaster carbine bounced away, firing off two random shots. He felt Thyne's left arm tighten around his neck and then he was hauled to his feet as the alien straightened up, his body shielding Thyne from fire.

The muzzle of a blaster pistol ground in under the right corner of Corran's jaw. A glow rod lit up, bathing the right side of Corran's face with light. The muscles on the arm around his neck bulged, constricting his breathing and killing any thoughts of struggling.

Thyne growled loudly, sending angry echoes of his voice throughout the cavern. "Your partner is dead if you don't show yourself in five seconds."

Those five seconds took an eternity to pass for Corran, and he filled it with an unending series of if-onlies. If only I had tucked the blaster pistol into my waistband when I took the carbine. If only I had the stiletto. If only I'd been more quiet in my advance....

Self-recriminations clogged his mind and fed the despair slowly creeping into his head.

Then his father stood up and the glow rod on his carbine burned to life. Illuminated by its backlight, Hal Horn stood twenty meters away, the carbine held steady in his right hand. He presented Thyne with a profile-offering him a target other than Corran. The expression on his father's face bore a gravity Corran had not seen since his mother's funeral. Hal's eyes seemed purged of anger and fear, but full of intent.

"It is my duty to inform you, Zekka Thyne, that I am inspector Hal Horn of the Corellian Security Force and you are under arrest. I have a valid warrant for your apprehension for violations of smuggling laws.

Let your hostage go and stop making things more difficult for yourself."

Thyne's chuckle came low and ringing with contempt.

"No, this is the way it's going to go. You're going to remove your finger from the trigger and lower your blaster."

"I can't do that."

"You will do that." Thyne tightened his hold on Corran's neck.

"My eyesight is good enough even in full darkness here that I can tell if your finger so much as twitches toward pulling the trigger. And my reflexes are good enough that I'll pump three shots through your

partner's head before you complete that move. You may get me, but your partner will be dead. Do it, now!"

Hal frowned. "Okay, don't do anything rash."

"Don't, Hal! Shoot him...."

Thyne jammed the gun harder into Corran's jaw. "You were stupid enough to join CorSec, let's not be stupid enough to die for it."

Hal's left hand came up. "Okay, I'm doing what you said. I'm pulling my finger off the trigger."

Corran tried to shake his head to tell his father not to comply with Thyne's order. He has to know that the second he disarms himself, Thyne will shoot me and then shoot him. I may already be dead, but no reason for him to die, too.

Hal Horn's right index finger slowly unhooked itself from the blaster carbine's trigger. As it did so the glow rod's backlight washed all color from the digits. The finger straightened and Corran saw bones pointing at him. It's over. We'll both be skeletons left here to molder forever.

Then the blue bolt shot from the carbine's muzzle. The air crackled and Corran's hair stood on end as the bolt sizzled past him and hit Thyne. The blue nimbus resulting from the shot sent a tingle through Corran's body and weakened him enough that he fell to his hands and knees. Behind him Thyne's body hit the ground with a heavy thump accompanied by the light clatter of the blaster pistol dancing off into the darkness.

Hal dropped to one knee beside his son, then pumped another stun round into Thyne. "Are you okay, son?"

Corran sat back on his heels. "I will be." He rubbed at the side of his neck with his right hand. "He gave me a bruise to balance the one Kast gave me. Having blaster bruises on my head and neck is an experience I could have done without."

"Beats having the bolts hit home, as our friend here discovered."

Corran looked at Thyne in the light from Hal's carbine.

The area around Thyne's right eye had begun to swell indicating where the bolt had hit him. "How did you...?"

Hal smiled. "The little gold diamond in his eye gave me a great target. I just focused on it-setting aside my concerns for you so I could-and hit him."

He frowned at his father. "No, not that. You had your finger clear of the trigger and the gun fired anyway. How did you do that?"

The spice vapor back there give you some sort of telekinetic power or something?"

"Me, move something with the power of my mind?"

Hal shook his head and brandished the carbine. "This is a hotshot. At the same time I pulled my index finger off the trigger, - I was able to bring my middle finger up and stroke the trigger. Nothing special or unusual, just sneaky."

Despite the smile on his father's face, and the cold logic of his answer, Corran couldn't shake the feeling that his father wasn't telling the entire truth. He probably doesn't want me to know how chancy his move was, but at least he had the guts to make it. I wouldn't have wanted to be in his boots for all the spice in the galaxy.

Hal handed Corran Thyne's blaster pistol, then hauled Thyne to his feet and tossed him over his shoulder. "I can feel a breeze from ahead.

We're almost clear."

Corran retrieved his own blaster carbine and carried it by the pistol- grip in his left hand while using the blaster pistol in his right hand and its glow rod to light their way out. "I see something up ahead. Stars and Selonja out there."

The two CorSec agents got clear of the cavern fairly easily. The mouth of it had been blocked with a lattice of iron bars with a door in it similar to those of the prison they'd escaped earlier. Corran shot the lock open then led the way out into a small grassy clearing.

Hal laid Thyne out on the ground and brought his blaster carbine to hand again. "Check him for a comlink.

We can call for transport to come get us."

Corran knelt over the body and began to search it when a vaguely mechanical sounding voice snapped an order at him.

"Drop the weapons, hands in the air." The first of eight stormtroopers emerged like ghosts from the trees surrounding the clearing. Their armor bone- white in the reflected moonlight, they made themselves very easy targets. The fact that each of them brandished a blaster carbine prompted Corran to raise his hands. I can't imagine any of them has a weapon set on stun.

Hal lowered his carbine to the ground carefully. "I'm Inspector Hal Horn and this is my partner, Corran Horn.

We're with CorSec. We've just apprehended Zekka Thyne."

The leader of the stormtroopers approached Hal.

"Looks as if you are trying to help Thyne escape and are lying to me."

Corran frowned. "What a stupid conclusion to draw. I don't know why you've got that big helmet to protect your head because there clearly isn't anything you're putting to good use under it."

The stormtrooper swung his gun to cover Corran. "On your feet, Black Scummer."

Corran glanced at his father as he stood. "I guess we're their prisoners. "

The stormtrooper shook his head. "Who said anything about taking prisoners?"

Hal's voice came low and calm, but full of intensity and power.

"I think I would want a specific order from a superior about shooting us. I think to operate otherwise would seriously jeopardize our career, and possibly your life."

The stormtrooper reoriented himself toward Hal and Corran thought for a moment he'd have to jump the man to prevent him from shooting Hal.

Corran would have gone for him, too, because he'd seen countless bodies that had ended up dead for making remarks that were no where near as confrontational. What held him back was the way the man's movements slowed as he watched Hal.

The stormtrooper wasn't reacting to the tone or challenge in the words, he was clearly considering their full import.

Will wonders never cease?

A comlink clicked inside the man's helmet and the murmurs of conversation hummed into the night. Corran smiled and shrugged at his father. Hal winked back and allowed himself the start of a grin.

The stormtrooper's head came up. "It'll be a minute or two wait."

Hal nodded, then jerked a thumb back toward the cave mouth.

"You'll want to have your squad secure that cavern. It leads back into Thyne's office. Your people can get inside and hit the towers from below because if shooting starts, your people are going to die taking that place."

The stormtrooper thought for a moment, then sent half his squad forward. The remaining trio set themselves up to watch the clearing perimeter while the leader kept his blaster on Corran and his father.

The night air had become a bit chilled and the fact that he'd been sweating earlier became readily apparent to Corran.

"Mind if I lower my arms? I'm getting cold."

The stormtrooper shook his head. "You can get colder."

"Nice night, isn't it?" Corran gave the man a toothy grin and hiked his arms up higher.

A soldier in the olive drab uniform of the Imperial Army broke through the brush, flanked by two more stormtroopers. The eight bar box with rank cylinders on each side worn (in his chest proclaimed him to be a Colonel.

His dark-eyed gaze flicked between father and son, then lingered on Thyne's body. "Zekka Thyne. You may put your hands down. I take it you must be the CorSec agents."

Hal nodded. "Hal Horn. This is my son, Corran. I have a disc that identifies me in my shoe. It also contains the open warrant CorSec has for searching this place and arresting Thyne. I can dig it out for you, if you wish, to prove who we are."

"I'm Colonel Veers and I believe you are who you say you are. My source indicated you would be coming out somewhere in this vicinity and even suggested we might want to backtrack you." He glanced at the stormtrooper who had threatened to kill them. "Apparently my reasons for dispatching this squad around here were not fully understood."

Hal shrugged. "No one got lit up, so no problem."

Corran pointed to Thyne. "We've gotten the nastiest of them out of there. There aren't many people left in there and, by now, they should all be Thyne's people."

Hal nodded. "You can safely consider it a free-fire zone."

"I'll remember that if they give us a reason to go in."

Veers smiled. "You didn't happen to notice any signs of Rebel agents or Rebellion supplies in there by any chance?"

"No, but as a CorSec Inspector, I do believe it is within my discretion to ask for assistance in serving a warrant and apprehending suspects."

Hal looked at the hillsides on either side of the valley.

"I should check with my liaison officer, but calling back to Crescent City from here would be impossible, so I guess I'm on my own."

Veers shook his head. "Pity."

"Indeed." Hal waved a hand toward the cavern. "Colonel, if you and your squad would care to assist me, I would be most appreciative."

"We always like working closely with local officials."

Veers gave Hal a nod and pointed his stormtroopers at the black hole.

"You heard him. No waiting for them to shoot first, we're clear to go."

The stormtroopers jogged forward in a clatter of armor.

Veers handed Hal a comlink. "Your transit code word is 'masterpiece.'"

At our perimeter just commandeer one of our landspeeders to get your prisoner out of here."

"Thanks." Hal, looking back toward the cave, pointed at a stream of green laser bolts coming from one of the mansion's towers toward the ground. "Looks like your war has started."

"Then we'll get in quickly and end it." Veers gave them a brief salute and ran off with his men.

Corran looked after the Imperial officer. "I thought Imps believed in leading from the rear."

"Not all of them, it seems." Hal grabbed Thyne's hands and hauled the man up onto his back. "Get the ankles there, will you?"

"Sure." Corran grabbed Thyne's ankles and trailed behind his father.

"So, is this the end of Black Sun on Corellia?"

"I doubt it. Two CorSec agents, a handful of smugglers and a bounty hunter who isn't a bounty hunter aren't going to be enough to bring Black Sun down. Even if the Colonel and his people level that place, Prince Xizor still has enough power and the resources to restore it to what it was before, and you have to know there are countless individuals willing to take Thyne's place."

Corran shivered. "Yeah, I'm afraid you're right. How depressing."

"Depressing?" Hal turned and looked back at his son.

"It's not depressing. As long as there are Horns to catch criminals, Prince Xizor is welcome to send all he cares to in our direction."

"And you don't find that prospect depressing?" Corran frowned at him.

"If it isn't depressing, what is it?"

"I think it's obvious, son." Hal's hearty laugh blotted out the whines of blasters being fired back and forth. "It's job security. It may not be easy work, and it's dangerous quite a bit of the time, but it's work that holds evil at bay and there's nothing better you can devote your life to doing."

Corran nodded and recalled a bit of conversation he'd had with Riij Winward. "And what will we do when the only evil left in the galaxy is the Empire?"

"That's a good question, Corran, a very good question."

Weariness seemed to creep into his father's voice.

"It's one that each person must answer for himself. I just hope, when the time comes for me to answer it, I'll have the wisdom to choose the right answer and the strength to act upon it."

"Me, too."

"You will, Corran, no doubt about that." Hal gave him a wink and a nod. "When the time comes, you'll see the light and those wallowing in darkness who move to oppose you will regret that decision throughout what little remains of their lives."

Part Four by Timothy Zahn

Zekka Thyne's airspeeders were stored on the low end of a split-level section of the fortress roof, inside a bunker-like structure with a single entrance from the stronghold proper and a single hangar bay-style exit. Two guards were on duty, but their attention was turned outward, toward the distant blaster fire coming from the woods around the fortress, and neither noticed the shadowy bulk of Rathe Pairor moving quietly up behind them.

A pair of deceptively gentle-looking hand movements from the Tunroth, and both guards temporarily lost the ability to notice anything.

"I'll have to get you to teach me that trick," Trell commented, ducking down to peer through the window of a likely looking airspeeder.

The vehicle looked ordinary enough, but in the dim light he could see the add-on weapons control board tucked coyly away under the main panel on the passenger side. Perfect. "We'll take this one."

You still have that molecular stiletto?"

"Here," the Tunroth rumbled, pausing in his task of stripping the guards' weapons to dig the slender cylinder from his belt. "Should we not take one of the armored vehicles instead?" he added, pointing his chin horns toward one of the three KAAC Freerunners parked near the wide exit opening as he lobbed the weapon in Trell's direction.

"They're a little obvious for in-town driving," Trell told him as he caught the stiletto. Extending the almost invisible blade, he began carefully cutting around the air-speeder's lock mechanism. "This one's got some hidden firepower-means it's probably got some hidden armor, too."

By the time pairor joined him, he had the door open and was sitting in the driver's seat. "Yeah, this'll do just fine," he said, pulling the weapons board out for a closer look. "Are you hunters any good with non-traditional stuff like light laser cannon and concussion grenade launchers?"

"A shturlan can work with all weapons," Pairor said, dropping his appropriated blaster rifles onto the rear seat and peering in over Trell's shoulder.

"Good-you're hired," Trell said, starting to strap himself in.

"I'll drive."

Trell wasn't sure what exactly was happening out in the woods surrounding Thyne's fortress. But whatever it was, it definitely seemed to be getting worse. The forest was alive with the muted flickers of multiple blaster fire, the light peeking coyly out through gaps in the leaf canopy on at least two sides of the stronghold. "I sure hope they're too busy out there to bother with us," he muttered as he eased the airspeeder through the opening and onto the landing pad just outside the bunker. "Corran and Hal are going to have their hands full getting through all that."

"But less trouble than it could be," Pairor said. "Do you not remember? Thyne has dispersed many of his people on errands."

Trell grimaced. "Yeah, I remember. One group to go grab our cargo, the other to snatch Maranne and Riiij."

"But at Jodo Kast's recommendation," Pairor reminded him. "If Kast is truly here to oppose Thyne, then he will not allow harm to come to our companions."

"I don't buy that," Trell growled. "Even if Corran and Hal were right about that, it doesn't mean he cares slork droppings about the rest of us. And that assumes they were right, which we don't have any proof of. Personally, I'd say there's an even chance that Thyne and Kast cooked up the whole thing together to expose a couple of undercover CorSec agents and lure 'em into a trap. In which case, they're probably already dead."

"If so, then we should be likewise," Pairor pointed out.

"Who are we that Kast would allow us to escape."

"Yeah, well, we haven't exactly escaped yet," Trell reminded him tartly, eying the open air off the edge of the landing pad with stomach-churning apprehension. But procrastination wouldn't gain them anything except increased odds that someone inside the fortress would notice they were missing and raise the alarm.

And besides--thanks to Kast Maranne and Riiij were walking into a trap out there at the Mynock's Haven can-tina.

Had possibly already walked into it. Riiij he wasn't so much worried about--the guy was a Rebel agent and not his responsibility.

But Maranne was his partner, and he was shrugged if he'd abandon her to Thyne's thugs.

"We waste time," Pairor rumbled at his side. "I will not leave Riiij in danger."

"Likewise," Trell said, keying in the repulsorlifts and throwing power to the drive. He wouldn't leave Maranne, and Pairor wouldn't leave Riiij; and as the fortress roof dropped away beneath them he realized with hindsight's usual clarity that Kast had probably set up the various groupings with precisely those different loyalties in mind.

Though to what end, he still didn't know. And wasn't sure he wanted to.

He was still mulling over the question thirty seconds later when the two TIE bombers dropped neatly into formation beside him.

They'd been sitting in the Mynock's Haven for nearly half an hour; and in Riiij Winward's opinion, it was yet another bust. "They're not coming," he said quietly to the woman on the other side of the small table. "Whoever we were supposed to meet here, they aren't coming."

"I think you're right," Maranne Darmic growled back, scratching viciously at the nape of her neck. "Score another big fat zero for the great and marvelous Jodo Kast."

"The greatly incompetent, you mean," Riiij said, looking with distaste at the yellow and redjebwa flower in the center of their table. Kast's datacard had specified the flower as their identification marker, but so far none of the cantina's other patrons had given it a second glance.

Considering the clientele, most of their first glances had been humiliating enough.

"Yeah," Maranne agreed. "It makes you seriously wonder about his chances of getting Trell and Pairor and the others out of Zekka Thyne's place."

"It makes me wonder if he even wants to get them out," Riiij countered darkly.

Maranne eyed him closely. "You think this whole thing was a setup?"

"It's looking more and more that way," Riiij said, scowling as he glanced around the cantina. "Look at the series of events. First he sends Trell to the wrong booth in Treasure Ship Row, which apparently tips off Thyne and his people that we're looking for Borbor Crisk.

Then he sends Trell, Pairor, and Hal back and lets them get snatched.

Finally, he goes there himself with Corran and sends us off on this idiot's errand. Someone in Kast's business can't possibly be that incompetent and have survived this long."

"You think it's someone else posing as Kast?" Maranne suggested.

"I mean, all we've ever seen is his armor."

"Possibly," Riiij said. "But now remember where this whole mess actually started: aboard an Imperial Star Destroyer."

"With us squeezed into running an Imperial captain's errand."

Maranne swore gently. "You're right. How stupid can one group of people be, anyway?"

"We're in line for some prizes, all right," Riiij agreed.

"The only question is what exactly the game is that the Imperials are playing."

"I vote for them trying to stir up trouble between Thyne and Crisk," Maranne said. "Maybe looking for an excuse to come down hard on both sides."

"Using the spice and gems as bait," Riiij said. "Still, whatever Kast's going for, there's one thing he doesn't know."

Maranne smiled tightly. "That the cargo isn't aboard the Hopskip anymore. "

"Exactly." Riiij dropped a couple of coins on the table and stood up.

"Come on, let's get out of here. Crisk's people aren't going to show."

"So what's our next move?" Maranne asked, standing up beside him.

"Kast's Plan B, I guess," Riiij said, turning toward the door and elbowing them a path through a pack of loiterers.

"We take our sample boxes to Thyne's fortress and see if we can make a deal to buy Trell and Pairor out."

Maranne caught up to his side. "You're going to follow Kast's plan?"

she asked incredulously. "What are you, crazy?"

"No, just desperate," Riiij conceded grimly. "Aside from the two of us storming the place, I don't see any other options."

"What about your-" Maranne threw a quick glance around and lowered her voice. "What about your friends?"

Riiij grimaced. His friends: the Rebel Alliance. A reasonable enough request, he supposed, especially since the only reason he and Pairor had been aboard the Hopskip in the first place was to baby-sit the load of blasters Trell and Maranne had agreed to smuggle to the Rebels on Derra IV. Unfortunately-"They can't help us," he told her regretfully.

"Even if the leaders agreed, it would take too long to gather together enough of a force to take on Thyne, Corellian Security, and the local Imperial garrison."

"You sure they just don't want Prince Xizor and Black Sun mad at them?"

Maranne asked nastily.

"You have to pick your fights carefully, Maranne," Riiij sighed.

"Personally, I think we've already bit off more than we can swallow."

"I suppose you're right," Maranne muttered. "Fine."

Let's give Plan B a try."

They had reached the door now, sliding their way through the middle of an incoming group of Duros and heading out into the muggy night air.

The Hopskip's dilapidated landspeeder was parked in the small lot to the left-"Excuse me?" a hesitant voice called.

Riiij turned, his hand dropping automatically to the butt of his blaster. A heavysset man had emerged from the cantina a handful of steps behind them, their jebwa flower clutched in a meaty hand.

"Yes?"

"You forgot your flower," the man said, lobbing it through the air toward him. Automatically, Riiij reached up to catch And suddenly there was a small blaster in the heavy man's fist. "Nice and easy," the man said. "Selty?"

"I'm on it," a voice said from somewhere behind Riij.

There was a quick set of approaching footsteps, and Riij felt his blaster being lifted from its holster. Another moment, and Maranne had been disarmed as well. "Got 'em."

"Now just keep moving," the first gunman said, gesturing Riij and Maranne in the direction they'd been going.

"Let's go take a look at your landspeeder."

The parking lot was dark and deserted. But it wasn't going to stay deserted for long. Even as Riij led the way toward the landspeeder he could see shadowy forms drifting in from all directions.

Whoever had gotten the drop on them didn't seem interested in taking any chances.

"You want to tell us which one's yours?" the heavyset man asked.

"You want to tell us whose side you're on?" Riij countered.

The other's eyes flashed. "Don't push it, scum," he warned harshly.

"You're in enough trouble with us as it is."

"Must be with Zekka Thyne," Maranne said ruefully.

"Must be," Riij agreed, his heart pounding a little harder. So it was definitely to Plan B now. "It's that dirt-brown one over there."

Two of the approaching thugs veered toward the land-speeder, the rest forming a loose but competent enough guard circle around the prisoners and their two escorts.

A double-sided circle, Riij noted with interest, with as many of their members facing outward as inward. Expecting trouble, maybe?

The thugs had the storage compartment open now and with grunts of satisfaction hauled out the two sleight boxes. "Got 'em, Grobber," one of them said. "Couple of sleight boxes, just like the man said."

"All set to fill up, huh?" the heavyset man said, throwing a dark look at Riij. "I guess Kast wasn't blowing smoke rings after all."

Riij threw a glance at Maranne, got the same look in return from her.

They'd been right; Kast was definitely playing some crazy double - or triple-edged game here.

"Kast told you about this?" he asked.

"Sure did," Grobber assured him. "So what were these for, the first payment?"

Riij shook his head. "Sorry, but I can't help you. We were hired to deliver the boxes and that was it."

"Sure," Grobber growled. "Just deliver the boxes: And if Crisk just happened to fill them up while your back was turned-well, hey, that's none of your business, right?"

Promk, what the frink are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" one of the men at the land-speeder retorted.

He had carried one of the boxes around to the hood and was in the process of popping the seal with a knife. "A couple of wise guys, a couple of empty boxes; I figured it might be fun to send 'em on to Crisk with their heads inside."

Riij was suddenly aware of his collar pressing against his throat.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," he said, striving to keep his voice even. "You don't know where the rest of the boxes are."

"We don't, huh?" Grobber sneered, digging out a comlink and thumbing it on. "Skinkner? Hey, Skinkner, look alive."

"Funny, Grobber, funny," a twisted voice came back.

"What d'ya want?"

"You at the Dewback Storage Warehouse yet?"

"Yeah, 'course we are. If you were hoping to report us to Thyne for slogging off, you're out of luck."

"Wouldn't think of it," Grobber said, sending another sneer toward Riij. "Still think we don't know where the rest of the boxes are, hotshot?"

Riij felt his stomach tighten. So much for Plan B. So much, too, for any leverage they might have had against Thyne and his mob. Any chance of rescuing Pairor and Trell was now squarely in his and Maranne's laps.

Assuming they were able to find a way out of this, their own private mess. Carefully, keeping his movements casual, Riij looked around the ring of thugs, trying to formulate some kind of reasonable plan-"Mother of smoke/" Riij jerked his head back around. Standing beside the landspeeder, Promk had finally gotten the sleight box open.

.. and even in the faint light Riij could see the stunned look on his face. "Grobber-you gotta-what the frinkingm?"

"Have you gone dust-happy?" Grobber demanded, striding toward him. He got two steps, and then suddenly his face changed, too. "What the-." he gasped, all but leaping the rest of the distance to Promk's side.

Riij sniffed the night breeze carefully, caught the faint odor of spice. "You were saying something about empty boxes?" he asked.

Grobber ignored him. "Get the other one open," he ordered, pulling out a knife of his own and probing delicately into the spice.

"Selly, get over here. The rest of you, watch for trouble."

Selly joined his boss as Promk brought around the second box and set to work, and for a moment the two thugs conversed in low voices over the spice box. The debate was interrupted by the crack of breaking duraplast, and the two joined Promk by the second box.

Someone whistled in awe. "Grobber-are those-?" "Durindfire gems," Grobber said, lifting his eyes like twin turbolasers to Riij's face.

"Let's have it, pal, and let's have it straight and fast. What the frink kind of game are you playing, anyway?"

"I told you before: we're not playing any games," Riij told him.

"We were sent to deliver the cargo, and that's it.

If there's a game going on, someone else is running it."

"Kast," one of the other thugs snarled.

"Or Kast and Crisk," Grobber snarled back, yanking out his comlink again. "Skinkner? Wake up, Skinkner."

"What d'ya want?" the other's voice demanded. "Frink it all, Grobber-" "Shut up and listen," Grobber bit out. "You looked in any of those boxes yet?"

"'Course not. Thyne said to just watch them until Crisk's blaster-boys came to fill them with-" "You idiot-they're already full," Grobber snapped.

"Which means the contract's already been filled."

The voice on the comlink swore. "Kast."

"That's my bet," Grobber said. "Start getting your boys together-I'm going to raise Control." He keyed the comlink again.

"Control? This is Grobber. Control?"

"Grobber!" a new voice half barked, half gasped.

"We've been trying to raise you for half an hour-where the frink are you? "

"At the Mynock's Haven," Grobber said. "Listen-" "No, you listen," the other cut him off. "We're under attack here, skrag it-you've got to get back right away."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Grobber said. "What attack?"

"Who's attacking?"

"Who do you think? The frinking Imperials, that's who."

Grobber threw a startled glance at selty. "The Imperials?"

"Started out as some anti-Rebel operation," Control said. "At least, that's what they told us. Then someone took a shot at them, and suddenly here they are, burning their way through the east wall."

"Skrag! Where's Thyne?"

"I don't know-we can't find him."

"Must have gotten out," Selty muttered.

"Or ducked into some private bunker," Grobber said.

"All right, Control, we're on our way. Skinkner?"

"We're packing up, too," Skinkner's voice confirmed.

"You want us to do anything with these other sleight boxes?"

"To blazes with the boxes," Control snapped. "We need you here."

"No, pack 'em up and bring 'em along," Grobber said.

"Grobber-" "They're worth a fortune," Grobber growled.

"Thyne'll have our heads if we leave 'em behind. Come on, how much trouble can a few Imperials be?"

Faintly over the comlink came the sound of a distant explosion.

"That answer your question?" Control snarled. "Get the frink back here."

And with a sudden hiss, the comlink went dead.

"They're jamming it," Grobber growled, shoving the cylinder back into his belt. "Selty, you take Promk and Bullkey and get these two and their landspeeder back to the fortress. Everyone else, back to the airspeeders. Move it!"

The others scattered. "Don't get any ideas," Grobber warned softly, glaring from under creased eyebrows at Riiij and Maranne.

"We're a long ways from being done with you two yet."

With that he stomped off after the rest of his mob, disappearing just as they had appeared back into the shadows again. "Get over here," Selty snapped, Waving Riiij and Maranne forward. Somewhere in the distance an avian or insect whistled, sounding strangely out of place in the urban setting. "Bullkey?"

"I'm on 'em," a deep voice came from behind Riiij, the confidence backed up by a blaster nudge in the back.

"Com on, move it."

Riiij started forward; and as he did so, Maranne veered slightly toward him and nudged him with her elbow. "Get ready," she murmured, just loud enough for him to hear.

At the landspeeder Promk, under Selty's direction, had picked up the box containing the Durindfire gems and was carrying it back toward the storage compartment.

The strange avian whistled again; and suddenly, inexplicably, one of the bottom edges of the box split open, spilling the gems out onto the ground.

"Promk!" Selty squeaked, aghast. "You stupid idiot."

He jumped forward, grabbing at the box as Promk tried to turn it upside down. For a moment they both fumbled with it, the prisoners temporarily forgotten - And from behind Riiij came a short gurgle and a muffled thump.

Beside him, he sensed Maranne preparing to charge.

"Not yet," he muttered, touching her warningly as he lengthened his stride. Preoccupied with the spilled gems, Selty and Promk hadn't yet noticed what had happened over here. Another four paces...

three... if they'd just fight with the box another few seconds...

one....

"Now," he murmured; and jumping forward, he put his left palm down on the landspeeder's hood and leaped over the vehicle to slam both feet hard against Promk's chest.

The thug didn't even have a chance to gurgle as he hit the ground, the sleight box spinning out of his hands into the darkness. Selty did have time for a startled curse and a grab for his holstered blaster before he went down with Maranne on top of him. A savage jab with her knee, and he went limp.

"Are you injured?" Pairor rumbled from behind them.

"No, we're fine," Riij assured him, regaining his balance and turning around. Behind the Tunroth, the third thug was lying in an unnaturally crumpled heap. "Nice job with Bullkey," he added.

"Not to mention the box," Maranne added, retrieving their appropriated blasters from Selty's belt and tossing Riij's back to him.

"How'd you manage that one?"

"That was mine," Trell said, stepping out from behind one of the other parked landspeeders and crossing to them. "Just an exquisitely well-thrown molecular stiletto."

"A whistle code and a molecular stiletto," Riij said, shaking his head wonderingly. "You two are just full of tricks, aren't you?"

"The stiletto was a gift," Trell said, crouching down beside the sleight box. "Blast-the blade's broken."

"Never mind the blade," Maranne said, crouching down beside him.

"Get the gems."

"Forget the gems," Riij told her, peering off in the direction Grobber and the others had gone. The rescue had been remarkably quiet, but if Grobber took it into his head to fly over this spot on the way back to Thyne's fortress, the four of them could still end up fertilizing a patch of razor grass. "Let's just get out of here."

"But-" "No, he's right," Trell said through clearly clenched teeth.

"If whatever's going on back at Thyne's place dies down fast enough we could still find Grobber's buddies camping out in the Hopskip's cargo bay. Just grab the box and whatever's still left inside."

Maranne hissed something vile sounding, but she nevertheless stood up, the now half-empty box in her hands.

"Fine," she said bitterly. "What about the spice?"

"Leave it here," Trell told her. "Corran said we wouldn't want to get caught shipping spice, and I'm rather inclined to agree with him."

"We can call CorSec on the way and tell them where to pick it up," Riij added. "Now let's go."

They all piled into the landspeeder. "Speaking of Corran and CorSec," Trell commented as he spun the vehicle around and kicked power to the engines. "Turns out they're one and the same."

"Corran's with Corellian Security?" Maranne asked, frowning at him.

"You're joking."

"That's how he and Hal were talking, anyway," Trell said. "Last we saw, they were heading off after Thyne."

Riij winced. "In the middle of Thyne's fortress? They haven't got a chance."

"That was also our estimation," Pairor agreed. "But counting the number of Thyne's warriors here and those fighting the Imperials outside his stronghold, it seems likely the core areas within may have been nearly deserted."

"'Nearly' might not have been good enough," Maranne said. "And what about Kast? He was still there, wasn't he?"

"I've given up trying to guess what kind of game Kast is playing," Trell said, twisting the landspeeder hard to get around a Herglic-parked speeder truck. "All I know is that he's the one who gave Corran the molecular stiletto that got us out of there."

"And we do not believe it was merely a trap," Pairor added. "We were challenged by Imperial TIE bombers as we left the stronghold; yet upon identification, we were permitted to pass."

"That had to be Corran and Hal's doing," Trell said.

"CorSec's supposed to be working pretty closely with the Imperials these days."

"Yes," Riij murmured, thinking back to the brief argument he'd had with Corran about the Rebellion. And now to find out Corran was actually CorSec. Could he have guessed Riij's true loyalties from that conversation?

"We were both permitted to pass," Pairor reminded him softly.

"I understand," Riij told him. "I also understand that the way everything else here's been going, that doesn't mean a whole lot. If we get to the Hopskip without running into an ambush-from any of the sides of this crazy powerplay-then maybe I'll believe we've gotten away with it."

"Gotten away with what?" Maranne asked.

Riij spread his hands. "With whatever in blazes we did here."

There was indeed no ambush poised outside the Hop-skip. Nor were any of their former companions Corran, Hal, or Kast waiting there.

What was there was a single datacard.

"Looks like the same stuff that Kast used to stick the molecular stiletto to Corran's cell bars," Trell commented, poking experimentally at the bits of adhesive residue that had been left on the datacard.

"Should we read it here, or inside?"

"Inside," Riiij said firmly, taking the datacard from him and glancing around. "And not until we're out of here."

You and Maranne get the pre-flight started; Pairor and I'll check to make sure no one left us any surprises."

Trell had the engines nursed and sputtering to life, and Maranne had the nav computer working on their course, when Riiij and pairor returned from their tour of the ship.

"Looks clean," Riiij told the others as the two of them took their seats. "Or at least, there's nothing obvious. You talked to the tower yet?"

"We're third in line to leave," Maranne told him. "You want to read us a sleepy-time story now?"

"Sure," Riiij said. From behind Trell came a faint rubbing sound-Riiij getting the last bits of adhesive off the datacard, probably-and then the brief scraping as he slid it into his datapad.

"It's from Kast," Riiij said. "'To the crew and passengers of the Hopskip: well done."

"Well done!" Maranne growled. "What in blazes-?"

"Shh," Trell cut her off. "Go on."

"'You have adequately completed the mission that was assigned you," Riiij continued. "You may return now to the Admonitor and retrieve your cargo. This datacard will serve as proof to Captain Niriz that you have fulfilled your side of the bargain and may have your cargo returned to you." Then it's signed with his name and what looks like some kind of ID mark."

"So he's not going back, huh?" Trell said, an odd feeling stirring in the pit of his stomach. "I'm not sure I like that."

"He must have arranged his payment to be delivered somewhere else," Maranne said. "It didn't look like he and Niriz got along very well."

"Perhaps his payment is in the remainder of the sleight boxes," pairor said.

"I wouldn't count on it," Riiij said. "There's a postscript: 'Do not return to the Dewback Storage Warehouse for the other sleight boxes."

They are empty."

"What?" Trell growled, half turning to glare back at Riiij over his shoulder. "Come on, now, that's just crazy.

You're telling me the two boxes you happened to take to the Mynock's Haven were the only ones with anything in them? What are the odds of that happening?"

"Not too bad, really," Maranne said grimly. "Not when you consider that they were the only two we knew we could open and then reseal again. They were leading us around by the nose the whole way, weren't they?"

"The whole way," Riiij agreed. "And don't bother with either the Durindfire gems or the spice. Both are counterfeit."

Trell looked across the cockpit, to find Maranne looking back at him.

There didn't seem to be anything to say.

There was another faint scraping behind him as Riiij pulled the datacard from the datapad. "Look, we got in and out again alive," he reminded them, reaching over Trell's shoulder to hand him the datacard.

"My instructors used to say that no mission you walked away from was a complete failure. Maybe we'll meet Corran and Hal someday and find out what this whole thing was all about."

Trell turned the datacard over in his hand. "I doubt it," he said.

"I'd say chances are good that neither of them knew what was going on, either."

He slid the datacard into a storage slot on his board.

"Come on, Maranne. Let's get out of here."

"I know this sort of thing embarrasses you," Captain Niriz said as he poured his guest a glass of aged R'allia mineral water, "so I'll only say it once. When I heard the reports of military action on CoreIlia, I was concerned for your safety. I'm glad to find out my fears were unfounded."

"Thank you, Captain," Grand Admiral Thrawn said, accepting the proffered glass and taking a sip. He was still wearing his Jodo Kast armor, though without the helmet and gauntlets. "You're wrong, though, about expression of concern and support being an embarrassment. On the contrary, loyalty is one of the two qualities I value most in my subordinates and colleagues."

"And the other?" Niriz asked, pouring a glass of R'allia water for himself.

"Competence," Thrawn said. "Has the Hopskip's cargo been reloaded aboard yet?"

"It's being done, sir," Niriz said. With most people, he thought distantly, the addition of Mandalorian armor would instantly create a powerful air of strength and mystery.

With Thrawn, in contrast, it almost seemed to detract from the sense of authority that was already there.

"The bridge has orders to let me know when they leave."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Which reminds me: you promised to let me know what all this was about when you returned."

"And I intend to do so," Thrawn assured him. "I'm waiting for one other person to join us here first."

Behind Niriz, the door slid open. Niriz turned, opening his mouth to reprimand whoever this officer or crewer was who would dare enter the captain's private office without permission-And an instant later was scrambling to his feet, the harsh words dying in his throat as if they'd been choked to death. The armored figure striding with casual arrogance through the door-"Ah; Lord Vader," Thrawn said, rising more easily to his feet. "Welcome aboard the Admonitor. We're honored by your presence."

"As we are with yours, Admiral Thrawn," Lord Darth Vader said, a distinct edge of challenge in his deep voice.

"You're nearly six hours late."

"I know, my Lord, and I apologize for keeping you waiting," Thrawn said, nodding his head deferentially.

"As it turned out, I was forced to significantly modify the plan I originally outlined to you."

"But the objective was achieved?" Vader demanded.

"It was indeed," Thrawn said. "Zekka Thyne and the Corellian branch of Prince Xizor's Black Sun have been effectively eliminated."

Niriz looked at Thrawn in surprise. "Zekka Thyne? But I thought-" "You thought the Emperor had an arrangement with Xizor?"

Vader demanded, turning that grisly mask toward him.

Niriz swallowed. Vader's reputation concerning flag officers who had displeased him... but on the other hand, Thrawn demanded absolute honesty from his subordinates.

"Yes, my Lord," he said. "I did."

Vader's stiff posture seemed to ease slightly. "For the moment, perhaps, that is true. But such arrangements are made to be altered."

He turned back to Thrawn. "Yet I understood there was Imperial action against Thyne's stronghold."

"A small battle only," Thrawn assured him. "And the battle was instigated from Thyne's side, as both sides' recorders will bear out."

The record will also show the Imperials were in the area solely because of information their commander received suggesting a Rebel force was gathering in the forest there."

"Information which you supplied, of course?" Vader asked.

"Of course," Thrawn nodded. "And since there can be no possible link between the verification code I used and any of your forces or contacts, Prince Xizor will be unable to create any connection between you and the mysterious informant."

"Yet Imperial troops were involved," Vader persisted.

"His first thought will certainly be of me."

Thrawn shook his head. "In fact, my Lord, the marginal Imperial involvement will actually tend to exonerate you in his eyes. He would expect you to launch either a full-fledged Imperial attack which he could easily trace back to you-or else to scrupulously avoid Imperial forces entirely, relying perhaps on your quiet bounty hunter or mercenary contacts. The ambiguity of the actual event will leave him confused and uncertain. Which, I believe, was one of your key objectives."

"It was," Vader said, sounding a little uncertain. "But as you say, Xizor knows of my bounty hunter connections."

Even though Jodo Kast is not among them, your assassination of Thyne while disguised as Kast will again lead his attention to me."

Thrawn smiled. "Yes, but I didn't assassinate Thyne. I was able to leave his fate in the hands of a pair of undercover CorSec agents."

Vader cocked his head slightly to the side. "I don't recall Corellian Security ever being mentioned in our discussions, Admiral."

"The two agents attached themselves to my group," Thrawn said.

"And it was obvious right from the start that they were in Coronet City for the specific purpose of getting to Thyne. It presented such a perfect opportunity that I decided to modify the original plan so that they would be the ones to deal with him."

"Then Thyne isn't dead?"

Thrawn shrugged. "At the very least he's out of power," he said.

"Actually, having him in CorSec custody would actually serve your purposes better than a quick death. It would leave Prince Xizor wondering if the Corellians were digging any dangerous secrets out of him. A major distraction; and distraction, I believe, was another of your key objectives."

There was a tone from the comm. Stepping to the console, Niriz keyed it on. "Niriz," he said.

"Hangar Bay Control, sir," a voice said. "Reporting as per orders that the Hopskip has just left."

"Thank you," Niriz said. "Signal the bridge to watch its vector when it jumps to lightspeed."

"Yes, sir."

Niriz keyed the comm off. "I gather the smugglers and their Rebel friends performed their part adequately?" Vader asked.

"Quite adequately," Thrawn assured him. "They provided the necessary excuse for me to move Thyne's men out and clear the way for the CorSec agents. "

The unseen eyes behind the black mask seemed to bore into Thrawn's face. "And the other part of your plan?"

Thrawn cocked a blue-black eyebrow at Niriz, "Captain?"

"Yes, sir," Niriz said. "A homing device has been installed inside each of the hidden blasters they were smuggling."

"And the boxes repacked exactly as they were?"

"To the millimeter," Niriz confirmed. "They'll have no way of knowing the boxes were even opened, let alone tampered with."

The Dark Lord nodded. "Excellent," he said.

The comm pinged again. "Captain, this is the bridge.

The Hopskip just jumped to lightspeed. Their vector's confirmed for the Shibric system."

"Thank you." Niriz looked at Thrawn, lifted his eyebrows.

The Grand Admiral nodded. "Have them prepare a course back to the Unknown Regions," he instructed.

"Our task here is finished."

"Yes, sir." Niriz gave the order and keyed off the comm.

"Unless," Thrawn added, looking at Vader, "you'd like me to deal with Prince Xizor directly for you."

"It is indeed a tempting thought," Vader said, his voice dark with veiled menace. "One alien against another? But no. Xizor is mine."

"As you wish," Thrawn said. "Incidentally, I doubt that Shibric is the final destination for those Rebel blasters."

From their vector, and other bits and pieces I gleaned along the trip, my guess is that their ultimate collection point will be somewhere in the Derra system."

"The homing devices will show us for certain," Vader said. "But the Derra system is rumored to have a strong Rebel presence. I'll make sure to have some forces waiting there."

"Very good," Thrawn said. "One final suggestion, and then I suspect we must both be on our separate ways. I understand the general in command of the Executor's ground forces resigned suddenly a month ago."

I was able to watch the battle outside Thyne's stronghold for a while as I waited to make sure the smugglers escaped; and in my opinion the Imperial officer in command is being wasted in a garrison assignment."

"Your opinion carries considerable weight," Vader said. "As I'm sure you know. The officer's name?"

"Colonel Veers," Thrawn said. "From the level of his tactical skill, I'd also say he's long overdue for a promotion."

Perhaps his political connections within the command structure leave something to be desired."

"Political connections do not concern me," Vader rumbled, stepping to the door. "I will see what I can do with this Colonel Veers. Thank you, Admiral."

"My pleasure, Lord Vader," Thrawn said with a respectful tilt of his head. "One favor for another. Perhaps we'll have the chance to work again together."

Once again, the hidden eyes seemed to probe the Grand Admiral's face.

"Perhaps," he said. "Farewell, Admiral."

And with a swirl of his long cloak he was gone. "An interesting exercise," Thrawn commented, crossing to the R'alla bottle and refilling his and Niriz's glasses. "I don't know though. I sense that this Rebellion is more powerful and better organized than perhaps Lord Vader realizes. I hope our activities here will allow him to deliver a crushing blow against it."

His glowing red eyes glittered as he took a sip from his glass.

"But that's not our concern, at least for now. Our concern is the Unknown Regions; and it's time we were getting back."

"Yes, sir." Niriz hesitated. "If I may be so bold, Admiral...

your last comment implied that you received something in return for helping Vader against Thyne and Black Sun. May I ask what that favor was?"

"A very personal gift, Captain," Thrawn said. "Which was why I felt the need to personally orchestrate Thyne's destruction. Lord Vader has turned over to me command of a group of alien commandos who have proven themselves highly valuable to him over the years. While I won't have much use for them in the Unknown Regions, I have no doubt I'll eventually be returning to the Empire proper. At that time-well, we shall see what they can do."

"I never heard of Vader employing aliens," Niriz said doubtfully.

"Are you sure he's telling-well-" "The truth?" Thrawn smiled.

"Indeed he is. Mark their name well, Captain: the Noghri. I guarantee you'll be hearing more of them."

He drained his glass and set it down. "But now to the bridge.

The Unknown Regions are calling; and we have a great deal of work yet to do."